

Based on the State of Things in Nature

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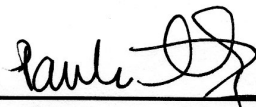
Based on the State of Things in Nature

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Throughout my life , my connection to art has been tied to a tradition of labor and to the natural environment. My attraction to the outdoors directly affects my material choices and the work I make. Through interacting closely with materials and environments, I am able to form an intimate relationship both conceptually and physically with the work. I am drawn to the tension that exists between intersections and boundaries such as those found in objects, environments and states of mind. Ultimately, these qualities provide me with the vehicle to communicate with the audience.

I grew up in a loving, blue-collar household, where many of the members in my family had physical jobs. These professions include lumberjacks, farmers, mechanics, carpenters, painters, and quarry operators. As a child, I befriended our garbage men. I would meet them early in the morning before school. They would give me toys found in the trash. The memory of these grown men, giving me rescued toys has stuck with me. I continue to think of this exchange when I discover found materials that I can use for my art.

My employment history has involved positions where physical labor, repetition, mark making, and site specificity. These continue to play a strong role in my artistic practice. These are qualities I have always admired in other artists. British sculptor Andy Goldsworthy works predominantly in the outdoors using natural materials. Since a young age, he worked as a farm laborer in the English countryside. In a 2007 article in *The Observer*, Goldsworthy states,

A lot of my work is like picking potatoes; you have to get into the rhythm of it (Adams, 2007, para. 13).

Through collecting, stacking, and other repetitive actions, Goldsworthy uses natural materials to create sculptures that resemble natural phenomena. The work has an extraordinary appearance that brings a strong awareness to the surrounding environment. It is familiar and recognizable due to the materials, yet differentiates itself from its environment through the use of repetition and the sense of his hand.

I place a great deal of importance in the search for a site, in the gathering of materials, and in the physical acts of building and mark making. By literally feeling the weight, surface, and balance of the materials, I form an understanding with it. Its existence is made concrete through my touch. Visual sensibilities direct the composition, but physical contact confirms the reality of the work.

Many of the materials I turn to come from the earth; such as wood from local trees, twine and sisal from perennials, and slip from local mineral deposits. This form of localism with the materials I use is a way for me to become attuned with my surroundings. The materials I use are either searched out, brought to me as a type of gift, or have been collected over time.

The connection I feel with materials goes beyond the way they entered my life. When I use them, I feel a connection with something much larger than myself, or the

art I am making. I feel that in a small way, I touch the essence of the earth. There is energy in these materials that goes well beyond our ability to grasp. They have lived, grown, moved, shifted, aged, decayed, sprouted, died, and assisted in a form of *permaculture* that harmoniously integrates the land with its inhabitants. Elements in a system are viewed in relationship to other elements where the outputs of one element become the inputs of another. The nature surrounding me offers these outputs that become my art, my input. These materials seem to have acquired a quiet wisdom through time. This is wisdom that we can't easily comprehend, but when considered, offers a sense of rootedness with the more tangible parts of life.

Many other artists use materials that they feel are embedded with meaning or power. Though I see our work being different, I do feel a certain connection with the material description associated with New York-based Serbian performance artist Marina Abramovic. In reading *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*, by Thomas McEvilley, I connected with her use of material and came to consider her as a working relative.

She explains, that energy can actually be captured in objects themselves. You can start with any object and create an energy field around it again and again through ritual. Gradually the object becomes a tool. (McEvilley, 1999, p. 192)

Abramovic's description of power objects was made during a time when she used crystals and serpents in her work. The serpents were used as power objects in a

variety of performances, including “Dragon Heads,” where she sat motionlessly in a business suit on blocks of ice while five pythons and boa constrictors climbed over her body and shit on her. Crystals were used in many pieces, such as “Waiting on an Idea” and “Shoes for Departure.” Marina considers materials, especially crystals, as having the power to heal because they “participate in an energy line like the cosmic voice harmonizing in the music of the spheres” (as cited by McEvilley, p. 190). Much of Abramovic’s work has been involved with attuning herself to that described energy line.

A similar material connection between Abramovic and myself begins to appear in my installation “Limb from Them (Spectral Life Everlasting)” (Fig 1.), which consists of a large black and white painting done on the gallery wall with wooden elements being attached to it and suspended from the ceiling in front of it. The gallery’s wall is painted black, but not covering the entire surface. I intentionally left roller marks along the outskirts of the mural. By painting the wall black, I began to take control of the beginning phases of this installation as an immersive environment.

Throughout the black surface, I intuitively painted large white sweeping marks and repeating patterns. They were done in a gestural manner that to some, visually contain similarities to primitivism. This was a time for me to explore the different ways a paintbrush can make a multitude of shapes and marks without forcing any kind of strongly desired image. Through this meditative process of painting, I played while figuring out designs and movement.

The wooden elements used in this piece possess a metaphysical quality. I see them as a visible corporeal spirit. The wood begins to form similar characteristics with the power objects described by Abramovic. They have been burnt by fire, then dry brushed with white paint on the surface of each piece (Fig 2.). The paint did not enter any of the low spots, leaving those areas a deep black. This created a strong visual contrast with black marks popping out among the white logs. I see this action as bringing out hidden secrets of the wood's texture that allows the audience to see the intricacies throughout the wood.

The wood has been collected throughout my time spent at Herron. Each piece has particular memories and their own personal story. After a night of burning the wood, I was driving my truck filled with charred chunks back to my studio. An ember was still hot, and once a strong stream of air began to flow through the bed of my truck, where the wood was piled, it started a small inferno. One large piece was set a blaze, setting the back of my truck on fire. This piece of wood and experience is an example of just one memory.

While working on "Limb from Them (Spectral Life Everlasting)", I felt myself loosen the grip I once had on creating such a direct and forced narrative. This piece had a sense of freedom that was lacking in much of my previous work. It evolved through exploration.

Suspension is a reoccurring compositional element within my work. Using it allows me to investigate floating compositions and the interactions of suspended objects with their surrounding environment. Working with these objects, I am able to create and explore visual and physical tension between the ground we stand on and the previously unoccupied space. This can be seen in the sculpture, "Paths of Condolence". In this piece, I suspended castings of fox and human footprints throughout the gallery. Long strands of sisal run from each cast track to the ceiling. The human tracks hang close to the floor, providing them with a grounded feeling (Fig 3.). The fox's footprints float above and are hung in a playful, more lyrical pattern, providing a counterpoint to the human tracks. The fox's tracks pounce effortlessly throughout space. They raise and lower in height, in contrast to the continuous pattern of the humans. Differentiating heights and the creation of two trails forms a visual path for the audience to follow throughout the space. The abundance of taut lines of sisal also forms false walls that help to further divide and activate the space with a delicate sense of mass implied by these repetitive linear marks. The tracks, of both fox and human are ethereal and impermanent. When I found the tracks, I used the snow surrounding the prints as the mold to created positive versions of them. By experimenting with layering graphite, plaster, hair, slip, and straw, I was able to "capture" the indentation in the snow. These delicate yet crude representations of the tracks are brought into the gallery creating a dialog between where they once were and where they now rest. The affects of the outdoors impacts and enters the indoors.

The sculpture “The Horizon Off” (Fig 4.) carries a visual weight that is distributed throughout its slenderness and height. There are two strands of twine suspending charred pieces of wood against a gallery wall. The wood is fastened together resembling a dilapidated fence, hanging vertically in front of the wall. The twine holding the charred wood runs up the wall. In front of the hanging fence, the twine suspends a yolk shaped form, covered in worn canvas. The yolk looks wounded while the twine that suspends it appears to have very light load capacity. This wounded or worn element relates to use and duty. Typically, yolks are tools used in heavy lifting, helping to distribute weight evenly. The yolk also acts as a window for the viewer’s sight. It directs attention towards the charred fence and the markings left on the wall, which suggests that the wood was at one point in motion, swinging back and forth. As the yolk shape narrows, one strand of twine runs toward the ground where it wraps around a few pieces of small Indiana slate and is then placed on soil.

“The Horizon Off” was based largely on inspiration that came from interacting with, and reacting to the gallery space. The concepts are linked to the work’s final composition and placement within the gallery. The size and limited palette of materials were intended to create a thoughtful space. The piece is not intended to be deciphered as a rational representation of the symbolism and characteristics of the materials and composition. Instead, it act’s as a poetic observation of the concept of these realities existence.

While at the Herron School of Art and Design, we were presented with the opportunity to create a proposal and compete for a commissioned public work of art. The site included 3 very large green spaces framed by interchanges located on the side of Interstate 70, a heavily trafficked highway running through Indianapolis. I was fortunate to be selected to create a large-scale sculpture for this site. This opportunity was made possible with the help of Keep Indianapolis Beautiful, the Basile Center for Art, Design, and Public Life, and the Lilly Endowment.

The scale of the site was so large that it demanded a significant mark on the landscape. I considered my own personal history and interest in nature. I began to explore how to create a forest in an urban, fast paced setting. The title for my first large-scale public sculpture is “Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)” (Fig 5.). This commissioned piece is predominantly made from large sections of Ash logs. Ash is slowly becoming extinct in America because of the invasive beetle, the Emerald Ash Borer. The logs’ history is one of an indigenous, but dwindling species being consumed by a non-native organism. While working with the Ash trees, I learned a great deal about the Emerald Ash Borer. It is an invasive species that is highly destructive to Ash trees and prevalent in a huge geographic range. The Ash Borer threatens 7.5 billion Ash trees in the United States. Since their accidental introduction into the United States and Canada in the 1990s, they have spread to 14 states and other parts of Canada. It has killed at least 50 million Ash trees so far, and threatens to kill the many still remaining in North American.

The wood's story suggests the title, Remembrance and martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog). Beverly is my grandmother and Birddog is my grandfather. They both are deceased now, but have had an important impact on my life and work. In his youth, Birddog was a rancher in Montana and a lumberjack in Washington State. During the physical parts of carving the logs for my sculpture, I began to feel a deeper connection with this man I barely knew. I would often imagine him in his youth doing tasks that were similar to those I used in creating this work.

The piece has a daunting scale, covering more than 8.6 acres. I used two strategies in developing the composition for this space. The first strategy used well-defined shapes within the landscape through the use of indigenous plants. I worked closely with two Landscape Architects from Browning Day-Mullins. Randy Royer and MJ Meneley worked on the master-landscaping plan for this section of town and agreed to work with me to develop an integrated design. Through this conversation, we were able to develop a coherent design that combined the movement of the flowing shapes of plant beds integrated with my layout design for the totemic elements. One role of the planting beds is to provide an element of change with the seasons, growing, blooming flowers, withering, dying, and being reborn (Fig 6.).

The second strategy in developing the composition uses repetition of a similar element to occupy and activate the site's large spaces. The repetitive elements included 59 individually carved logs, each standing between eight and sixteen feet

tall. Carving the totems began as an intuitive process that developed through experimentation with carving techniques. As I worked with the wood, I developed a vocabulary of mark making with the chainsaw; I eventually named this saw C.J. Birddog. Through prolonged investigation and practice, I was able to discover different ways to effectively carve and manipulate the surface of the logs so that each view of each totem is unique. They began to possess the same gestural qualities and visual similarities that were present in the large black and white wall painting in "Limb from Them (Spectral Life Everlasting)". When placed with many other similarly carved logs, they create a coherent mass. The field of logs, as a whole, appears uniform due to the similar processes used during carving, but when viewed individually, each one offers an intimate experience, unique from the other logs.

The logs stand vertically and are visible from multiple angles. Their placement throughout the site responds to the different routes that are available for driving around the space and to the various speeds which cars travel. The site is located along the side of a major highway running through Indianapolis. Viewers will regularly pass the sculpture at speeds of roughly 70mph. Different ways to enter and exit the highway allow other opportunities to see the work. I felt that the logs needed to occupy areas where the passing viewer had a number of vantage points, to see the work. This is intended to create a unique visual experience where the logs will interact with each other throughout the landscape by showing depth and redefining the space. The carving on the logs constantly reveals different marks as the viewer goes around the work.

In regards to the Ash tree, Sandra Kynes (2006) wrote in *Whispers from the Woods* that, “In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil is a fantastic tree that connects heaven and earth. Its leaves provided shade and shelter for the entire earth and was known as the World Tree. This immortal tree carried the destiny of the world; if the tree was destroyed, the world would perish” (P. 122). Upon reading this “Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)” took on a new life beyond the work’s site and audience. It began to possess aspects of a monument or memorial. The work now describes a species slowly becoming extinct shown in an artistic manner, commemorating their importance in history, and being an identifier of this tragedy that threatens their existence.

“Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)” has been in motion throughout most of my journey in Graduate School. As part of a group thesis exhibition with the other graduate students, I was able to create an installation in a large gallery setting using some of the totemic elements that will ultimately be placed at I-70. With the opportunity to show the piece in this new context, the work reads much differently (Fig 7.). In a roofed, environment the height of the totems emphasizes their monumental qualities. In this setting, you have the ability to walk through the piece, examine it up close, and feel the weight and presence of this created forest. The work differs from its other form along the interstate because in the gallery, it becomes an intimate experience where the viewer is able to spend time with the piece. Wrapping canvas around the bases gives them a quality of care

and helps to create a more delicate transition between the totems and gallery's floor. The canvas works as a signifier of age, wisdom, and importance. In the final thesis exhibition, "Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)" becomes a marker of my time at Herron School of Art and Design. This work provides me with a sense of having come full circle with the many learning experiences involved in and around my first commissioned public sculpture (Fig 8.).

During my last year as a Herron student, my work, the commissioned sculpture and writing underwent many changes. My studio work achieved new insight, depth and focus through the positive and knowledgeable work environment created at the sculpture facility. Critiques, career related opportunities, one on one conversation's with visiting artists, excellent professors and progressive facilities all assisted in pushing my studio work towards an advanced state. The thesis continued to hold a relationship with my body of work as they simultaneously developed. This process was an ever-changing dance. It involved constant re-formulation of the thoughts and conditions surrounding my development; a breaking of the ego, a reminder that we are all students. The I-70 commission was a beneficial learning experience, helping me develop professionally in my artistic career. It took me outside of the studio and gave me opportunities to work alongside landscape architects, foundation contractors and the local community. The commission, thesis and my body of studio work kept me grounded and focused while teaching me what it takes to become a successful artist.

“Limb from Them (Spectral Life Everlasting)”

Figure 1.



Figure 2.



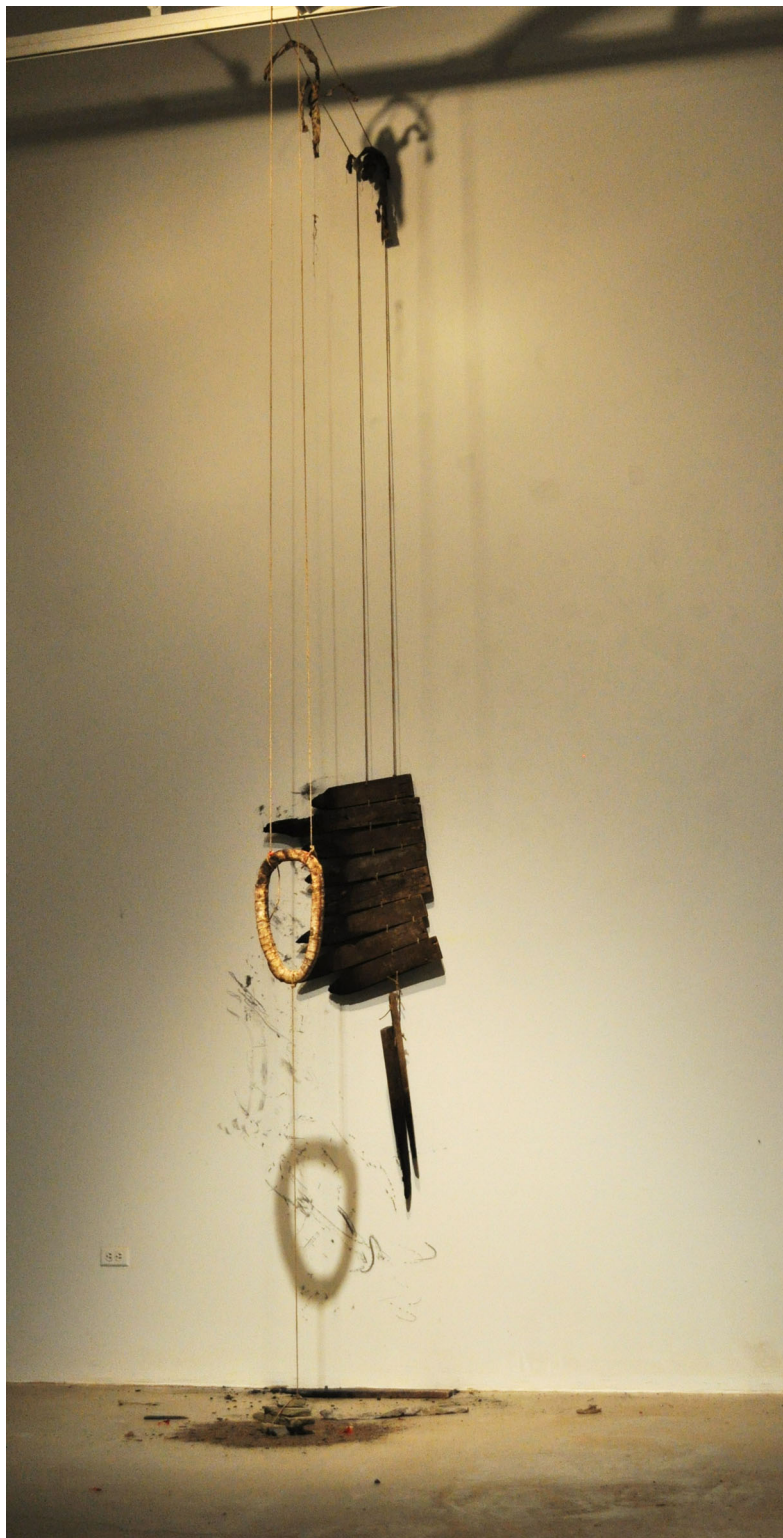
“Paths of Condolence”

Figure 3.



“The Horizon Off”

Figure 4.



“Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)”

Figure 5.



Figure 6.



“Remembrance and Martyrs (For Beverly and Birddog)”

Figure 7.



Figure 8.



McEvelley, T. (1999). *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. New York: Allworth Press

Kynes, S. (2006). *Whispers from the Woods*. Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications

Adams, T. (2007, March 11). Natural Talent. *The Observer*. Retrieved May 12, 2011, from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2007/mar/11/art.features3>